

EDITORIAL

Reports of people who are said to be highly sensitive to magnetic fields or electromagnetic radiation are published occasionally, but I have yet to hear of any such claims being scientifically tested. A recent report concerns a woman who 'said she suffered from piercing head pains, blurred vision and nausea every time she went near a computer'. It is claimed that these effects are caused by anything containing a microchip, but more old-fashioned electric and electronic devices do not affect her. She said that her doctor told her that 'her brain produced insufficient waves to counteract the modern frequencies emitted by computers'. The doctor also said: 'It is so rare people often dismiss it as a psychological problem, but it is certainly not.'

It would surely be quite simple to put such a claim to the test. All that is needed is to conduct a laboratory experiment in which the woman is exposed to a device containing microchips, another device which looks as if it might contain microchips but doesn't, and a concealed device containing microchips. Similar experiments could be done to test other people who make similar claims. I have never heard of such tests being done; all we ever get is pseudoscientific gobbledegook. I wonder why?

UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL HYPOTHESIS

Many critics of the psychosocial hypothesis (PSH) seem to assume that it purports to explain all UFO reports, but this assumption is a serious error which leads to much needless (and meaningless) controversy.

The purpose of the PSH is to strip away the psychological and mythical elements from reports of alleged UFO incidents, so that the verifiable facts of any particular case can be laid bare. What starts as a puzzling sighting, or series of sightings, often accretes false interpretations drawn from the UFO myths which have developed since 1947. When such a sighting receives publicity it attracts hoaxers and fantasists who cause confusion and make it seem, to the credulous, far more mysterious than it really is.

The purpose of the PSH is not to attempt to show that unusual events do not really happen but, by separating fact from imagination and misinterpretation, to discover the truth about them. No complicated or controversial psychological theories need to be employed to do this; common sense is usually sufficient.

It is important to realise that the PSH was developed in response to the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH). If the popular myth of visitations by alien spacecraft did not exist, it would have been taken for granted that UFO reports were generated by sightings of unusual aircraft or natural phenomena, and that the imperfections of human perception and memory could account for any strange details or inconsistencies in the reports. No one would seriously suggest UFO sightings as evidence of alien visitation unless there were compelling reasons for doing so.

A good example of the difference between the ETH approach and the PSH approach is the Berwyn Mountain case. A few years ago, ETH proponents in Britain were putting about stories about this incident which can briefly be summarised as follows:

On the night of 23 January 1974 a UFO crashed in the Berwyn Mountains in North Wales. There were strange lights seen in the sky and a loud explosion was heard. A local nurse, fearing that

there might have been a plane crash, set off up the mountain in her car, but was turned back by soldiers guarding the area, but not before she saw the grounded UFO glowing in the distance. Dead aliens from the saucer were taken by soldiers to Porton Down in Wiltshire. Local people were closely questioned by a team of mysterious strangers who moved into the area shortly after the incident. These and other amazing facts were discovered by intrepid ufologists, despite efforts by the authorities to conceal them.

As Andy Roberts was to discover, the true facts were somewhat different. (1) Although the incident happened a long time ago there had been no serious investigation, apart from some ufologists talking to people who were, or who claimed to be, witnesses and putting an ETH spin on the stories they were told.

Roberts discovered that the lights in the sky were caused by exceptionally bright bolides which were seen that evening. There were at least four of them. Records kept by astronomers at Leicester University showed that the timing of one of them coincided with an earth tremor, accompanied by a sound like an explosion, at 8.30 pm. This earth tremor was investigated by the British Geological Survey, which sent a team to the area to question local people about the event. This accounts for the story of the mysterious strangers.

The nurse did indeed go up the mountain but she did not encounter anyone there. The story about the military sealing off part of the mountain probably arose from the fact that witnesses were questioned many years after the incident and probably confused it with an incident in 1982 when an RAF Harrier jet crashed in the area and the crash site was sealed off until the wreckage was cleared up.

The mysterious lights, thought to be a grounded UFO, turned out to be lamps powered by car batteries being used by poachers.

There was no independent corroboration of the story of the aliens being taken to Porton Down, and internal inconsistencies in the story added to its lack of credibility.

Of course, in unravelling this case, Andy Roberts did not explicitly employ the PSH, except to suggest that the affair was 'a tangle of belief and wishful thinking'. The point I am making here is that ETH proponents who looked at the story tended to believe anything which confirmed their beliefs, and showed little interest in discovering the facts and critically analysing testimony to sort out reliable reporting from misinterpretation and fantasy.

Finally, it should be emphasised that the PSH does not purport to explain anything by itself. It is merely employed to consider how UFO reports are so easily fitted into a ready-made mythology. Much is said about the reliability or otherwise of witnesses, but the reliability of ufologists is more important. A devotion to the ETH inevitably leads to wishful thinking and a tendency to twist the facts to fit it. On the other hand, the PSH must not be confused with the extreme sceptical approach, which discards awkward facts in order to produce simple and satisfactorily mundane solutions to mysterious occurrences.

Reference

1. Roberts, Andy. "Fire on the Mountain", in Jenny Randles, Andy Roberts and David Clarke, *The UFOs That Never Were*, London House, 2000

LITERARY CRITICISM

Phillip H. Wiebe. *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today*, Oxford University Press, 1998. £12.99

While portions of this book are of a chiefly theological character, there is much in it which should be of interest to *Magonia* readers. The core of the study deals with 28 cases of modern 'Christic visions', in which people claim to have had a vision or other chiefly visual encounter with a figure they identify as Jesus Christ. These visions have much in common with the range of visionary material we have been studying, and much of Wiebe's commentary could apply to those as well.

He classifies the visions into four main categories: 1) those taking place in dream or trance-like states; 2) waking experiences in which the environment seems to change (what Green and McCreery called metachoric experiences); 3) those in which the figure of Jesus is seen as superimposed on the normal environment; 4) those of a collective character, or which seem to impact on the

environment, i.e. produce physical evidence. Such a categorisation may be useful for a wider range of anomalous personal experiences.

Of the four cases of physical evidence mentioned here, three are essentially bounded by the narrative, i.e. the only evidence for it is that the narrator says it exists. Two of these were healings, and one a ground trace identical to those claimed in UFO reports: deep snow disappeared where Jesus stood, and there was a 3-foot diameter circle of burned grass. This suggests very much that we are dealing with a narrative convention in which anomalies in the environment are incorporated into narratives as 'stigmata of the supernatural' marking places where theophanies occurred rather than a unique physical phenomenon.

One case of physical evidence involved an alleged film of the materialisation of Jesus in a Pentecostal church in Oakland, California, part of an ongoing series of paranormal events there. Various other people, including Wiebe himself as a teenager, remember seeing the film, but it comes as no surprise to Magonians that it is now reported stolen. Memories of the film differ, and some people who were present when it was shown do not appear to have any memory of it at all. Is there a connection here with the newish Fortean experience, memories of non-existent photographs, like the 'Thunderbird' photograph which has been dealt with at length in *Strange Magazine*.

The general run of experiences do not look as though they have a common origin; some seem to relate to dream-like, possibly narcoleptic and epileptiform states, others fall into the hypnagogic/hypnopomic category, some within the context of spiritual crisis and religious conversion, while others have a strange matter-of-fact quality. Of course it has to be borne in mind that what we are really dealing with here are personal memorates of experience, not experience itself, as Wiebe was not present when any of these events took place. In some cases the narratives do appear to be part of an established religious biography, particularly when the narrator is a religious professional of one sort or another.

Wiebe examines a range of explanations for these experiences, supernatural, paranormal, psychological and neurological, not finding any of them truly satisfactory, but suggests that they may be tentatively interpreted as evidence of the transcendental. That conclusion he would admit must be a matter of personal faith, and he hints that such an interpretation would not necessarily contradict a naturalistic explanation at the empirical level.

Peter Rogerson

LETTER

I would like to say some words on a certain often repeated argument that goes: 'The results of the Battelle Memorial Institute study showed that the better the sighting, the more likely it is to be unexplainable in terms of known phenomena, hence true UFOs do exist'. This study, commissioned by the USAF in the fifties, found that 'excellent' reports contained a higher percentage of 'unknowns' than 'poor' reports (besides 'knowns' and 'unknowns', there was a separate category for 'insufficient information' reports, so that couldn't be counted). But can we really draw any conclusion from such heterogeneous data, such disputable criteria and so many factors playing their roles?

The usual assumption underlying the argument is: '*If there were no true UFOs*, the most reliable cases would have the lowest percentage of unexplained'

I'll try to show that this is dubious, at best.

The Battelle analysts divided the sightings into reliability groups, based on the quality, completeness and self-consistency of the *report* and upon the quality and experience of the *witness*. We can argue about how can this evaluation be accomplished in practice and about its true relevance, but this is not the point that I want to make here.

If we focus on the *report* side of this concept of reliability, it seems reasonable that the cases considered most reliable are the least likely to have erroneous data or to be incomplete in their descriptions and hence should have the least percentage of unknowns if there were no true UFOs.

But what if we focus on the *witness* side?

1) We'll assume that the most reliable witnesses are the least prone to experience misperceptions/misinterpretations that could lead them to report UFOs.

2) Let's suppose that most, if not all, UFO cases are explainable, most of them as misperceptions/misinterpretations (for simplicity's sake, we'll set aside delusions, hoaxes . . .).

3) The key point is that the most reliable witnesses will report the least number of cases due to

misperceptions/misinterpretations but those reported will be in the class of those most difficult to explain, since they are not easily fooled by most stimuli, at least under normal conditions.

4) Therefore, after the analysis, the group of cases with the more reliable witnesses will show the larger percentage of unknowns. Note that in any group of less reliable witnesses, besides these difficult cases we'll find many cases of misperceptions/misinterpretations more easily resolvable after analysis, that will count as knowns, so lowering the *percentage* of unknowns.

5) Finally, this trend will also appear in the overall analysis of cases vs. reliability, since witness reliability is one of the pillars of the general concept of reliability handled in the study. Hence we conclude that the cases considered most reliable should have the higher percentage of unknowns if there were no true UFOs!

Obviously, this is not to say that the Battelle results prove that there are no true UFOs. What I intended to show is that they don't admit a straightforward interpretation as many ufologists think.

I hope the examples below will help to clarify all this.

Let's start with a group of so-called 'reliable witnesses' and another of average people. Now imagine that individuals from both groups experience the following situations:

a) At night, in a secluded place, members of a sect perform a silent procession, holding torches and wearing black clothes. Casual observers are surprised by strange lights moving in circle near the ground for some minutes.

b) An unusual red light (in fact, Venus) seems to approach the witness's plane and keep pace with it for a while before disappearing at a fantastic speed. Later, the witness will report a *wrong* date for the event.

c) Witnesses observe a landed 'flying saucer' and, afterwards, an ascending green light, all arranged by sophisticated pranksters.

Observers in both groups report the three sightings above as UFOs. Subsequent analysis fails to solve them and they remain as unknowns.

d) A plane brightly illuminated by the sun makes an odd display in the twilight sky.

e) A cloud in the upper atmosphere resulting from a ballistic missile secret test is taken for a mysterious nearby phenomenon by some observers.

Again, witnesses in both groups report these sightings as UFOs. But this time, subsequent analysis finds the right explanations.

f) One night, an observer from the 'average' group discovers the hovering lights of a phantom airship. A nearby 'reliable' observer recognizes Venus and Jupiter, very close in conjunction.

g) A yellowish disc follows the car of a witness of the 'average' group for many miles and, finally, it seems to land behind some trees. Shortly after, a 'reliable' observer experiences the same, but when he stops the car to better observe he quickly realises he has been watching the moon.

In these two last examples, *only* observers from the second group (less reliable observers) report seeing UFOs. Analysis comes up later with the correct identifications.

To sum up, the resulting proportion of unknowns in the 'reliable witnesses' group is 60% (3 out of 5), while in the 'average witnesses' group it is about 43% (3 out of 7)! Hence, *if there were no true UFOs*, the cases with most reliable witnesses would have the highest percentage unexplained.

Manuel Borraz, Barcelona, Spain

STING IN THE TAIL

The Daily Telegraph has long been noted for its eccentric readers' letters. Some years ago there was a lengthy correspondence on the subject of pet flies. Recently there has been one on the sport of wasp hunting, the object being to trace the wasp back to its nest. This involves holding the wasp against a window and tying a length of white cotton round it. The wasp is then released and, slowed down by the cotton, is easily followed. Another correspondent suggested it was better to sprinkle them with flour to make them highly visible. Mr Paul Carr-Griffin of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwl-llantysiliogogooch, expected that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Wasps would ask the Government to ban the sport. (I am not making this up - Ed.)

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